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# Labor Standards After the War

By SAMUEL GOMPERS

THE affairs of the whole world are in the process of remaking. Relations between nation and nation, and between the peoples within the various nations, and among working people particularly, are undergoing a new change and a new life.

We are accustomed in these last few years to talk about reconstruction, the reconstruction of personal, political and industrial relations in the whole world. There are peoples who believe that the form of reconstruction must be elevation of the masses of the working people of the world. Among those are the people who believe that the principles for which the world war was waged, freedom and justice and democracy, shall find their true expression in every day life.

On the other hand, the old-time masters of the political and industrial world have not lost their hope to maintain their domination over the people. They are the old Bourbons of the whole world. Among them are some employers of labor in the United States, particularly the National Manufacturers' Association and the association of employers called the National Founders' Association. William H. Barr, of Buffalo, president of the latter association, obtained a moment's newspaper publicity by demanding at its annual conference abolition of the national eight-hour working day and a lowering of the war-time wage scale as essential if American mines and factories are to continue to compete in the world of trade. An accompanying suggestion that excessive war prices of commodities be lowered failed to appear.

There are some people who do not understand—there are some people who will not understand—all that was meant by the willingness of the people of the democracies to fight and make the sacrifices in order that a better time shall come to the workers. It was said of the Bourbons of France that, having learned nothing, they could forget nothing, and some employers of the United States, typified by Mr. Barr, are the Bourbons of our country. The same character of information has come from various quarters, but the American working people will not be forced back by Barr, his association, or all the Bourbons in the United States.

The time has come when the working people of the world are coming into their own. They have new rights and new advantages, they have made the sacrifices, and they are going to enjoy the better times for which the whole world has been in convulsion.

The American labor movement whole-heartedly supported this world struggle. The American labor movement went to the fullest lengths in support of that struggle, and we knew what was involved. The day of absolutism in industry is gone, just as absolutism in government has been destroyed.

The American labor movement will coöperate with all other agencies to help in this reconstruction time. Our movement is not to destroy, but to construct,—but all may just as well understand now as at any other time that the advantages which the workers of America and of the Allied countries have gained, and which we hope to extend to the people even of the conquered countries, are not going to be taken away from us, and that we will resist to the uttermost any attempt to take them away.

The principal danger is that we may at some time in the future revert to the old conditions of unemployment. The continually increasing cost of living entails the necessity of continually increasing wages, but a surplus in the labor market makes it difficult, if not impossible, for wages to keep pace with living costs. Intermittent employment with low wages is one of the chief causes of poverty with its accompanying misery and its social and personal demoralization. Reasonable farsightedness in readjustment will obviate a labor surplus. We have a right to demand, and we do demand, that such reasonable farsightedness be exercised. The American Federation of Labor expects governments—national, state and local—to adopt every measure necessary to prevent unemployment. During the coming period of reconstruction every wage-earner should be afforded the opportunity of suitable employment and an income and sustenance sufficient to enable him, without the labor of mother and children, to maintain himself and family in health and comfort, and to provide a competence for old age with ample provision for recreation and good citizenship. Governments should:—

(a) Prepare and inaugurate plans to build model homes for the wage-earners;

(b) Establish a system of credits whereby the workers may

borrow money for a long term of years at a low rate of interest to build their own homes;

(c) Encourage, protect and extend credit to voluntary, non-profitmaking and joint tenancy associations;

(d) Exempt from taxation and grant other subsidies for houses constructed for the occupancy of their owners;

(e) Relieve municipalities from the restrictions preventing them from undertaking proper housing plans;

(f) Encourage and support the erection and maintenance of houses where workers may find lodging and nourishing food during the periods of unemployment.

Much talk has been made about preparing plans for the construction of public buildings, roads and other public works in order to avoid unemployment. All such suggestions are good, in so far as these things are needed, and no farther. There can be no question, however, of the urgent, immediate need of great numbers of wholesome houses at reasonable costs for working people. The environment offered by many of the tenements is unfit to surround the growing children of a free republic. The revolting conditions in many tenement districts, without sufficient light, air or play spaces, tend to produce persons unfit for citizenship. Squalor and almost unlivable conditions are still found in many houses of the workers whose compensation is inadequate, where opportunity to associate with their fellow-workmen for their moral, intellectual and industrial improvement is persistently and successfully denied. Such housing should not be permitted to exist.

The employment of public funds in the provision of homes for workers is a far better investment than large expenditures on ornamental buildings and beautiful boulevards seldom, if ever, seen by the poor. If large expenditures of public money are needed to avoid unemployment, the construction of houses is of far greater public benefit, especially to the poor, promoting health, happiness and good citizenship. Moreover, such investments have the added merit of returning to the public treasury without loss, and even with gain.

There is developing very rapidly a public demand that every worker shall be provided with a decent, sanitary and comfortable home. The wage-earners of America are deserving of this new

conception of living and are entitled to no less. This, then, is the inspiration, the motive of one of the ultimate objects of the American Federation of Labor.

The demand of the wage-earners is not only for sanitary and fit houses to live in, but that a sufficient number of houses shall be available so that they may be freed from the evils of high rents, overcrowding and congestion. The ordinary method of supplying houses through their erection by private capital for investment and speculation has rarely, if ever, been adequate. Nearly all of our workmen's habitations are built on a system of exploitation. Most of the houses built for the wage-earners are built to sell. This system of exploitation does not permit of proper housing facilities and adequate upkeep.

Our present practices and policies for housing the workers are unjust. We demand that every wage-earner shall be afforded the opportunity of living in a healthful, wholesome dwelling and environment which shall tend to uplift and not debase. The safety of the republic is not promoted, nor its standard of citizenship elevated, by the streams of persons reared in slums and unsanitary tenements.

The fact that there is danger of unemployment, a shortage of food stuffs and demoralizing congestion of population, while there are hundreds of millions of acres of agricultural, suburban and urban lands lying idle, should make a deeper impression upon public thought than it has heretofore done. We should no longer hesitate in forcing unused lands into use by exempting all improvements from taxation and by placing a tax on non-productive the same as on productive land. Regular employment, comfortable homes, necessities at reasonable cost and an adequate income are urgent demands. Reconstruction will fail unless these conditions are attained.

To attain them the workers must be assured that they are guaranteed and encouraged in the exercise of their right to organize and associate with their fellow-workmen in the trade unions and deal collectively with employers through such representation of their unions as they may choose, for their improved economic and industrial conditions and relations.

Perhaps the following might be regarded as a summary of demands to be satisfied in the pending readjustment of conditions:

No wage reductions.

No lengthening of the working day.

Opportunity for suitable, regular, remunerative employment.

A workday of not more than eight hours; a work week of not more than five and a half days.

Protection for women and children from overwork, underpay and unsuitable employment.

Increased opportunity for both education and play for children.

The elimination of private monopolies and protection from the extortions of profiteers.

Final disposition of the railroads, telegraph, telephone and cable systems to be determined by consideration of the rights and interests of the whole people, rather than the special privileges and interests of a few.

Comfortable, sanitary homes in wholesome environment, rather than elaborate improvements of no special benefit to the masses of the people.

Heavier taxation of idle lands, to the end that they may be used for the public good.

A government made more responsive to the demands of justice and the common good by the adoption of initiative and referendum measures.

In a word, any and all measures shall be taken tending toward constant growth and development of the economic, industrial, political, social and humane conditions for the toilers, to make life the better worth living, to develop all that is best in the human being and making for the whole people a structure wherein each will vie with the other in the establishment of the highest and best concepts and ideals of the human family.